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SUBJECT: IEC: A CREDIBLE ELECTION IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY

¶1. Summary: On June 22, Ambassador Eikenberry visited the Independent Election Commission (IEC), toured operational elements and after a private meeting, participated in a joint press conference with IEC Chairman Dr. Azizullah Lodin. IEC workers and officials echoed security concerns, but the strongest message was the desire of the Afghan people for their democracy to succeed. The Ambassador took advantage of a question about his meetings with candidates to challenge the media to encourage an issues based debate to help voters to decide how to cast their ballots in this milestone election. End Summary.

Afghans Working for an Afghan Election

¶2. The Ambassador's first stop at the IEC was the massive data entry center (DEC). Filled with computers, scanners, workers and boxes of voter registration (VR) material retrieved from the provinces, the data center is a hub of activity. Chief Electoral Officer Dr. Najafi noted that the IEC received over 10,000 applications for the 300 data entry jobs. The DEC is currently counting, reviewing and scanning VR materials into the IEC's voter registration database. Many workers explained their specific jobs to the Ambassador - from reviewing biometric information to checking the forms against the scanned information - and expressed their pride at contributing to a key milestone in their nation's democratic process. The DEC explained that the data entry process will help identify multiple registrations using a single set of biometrics, allowing the IEC to reduce duplicate registrations.

Concerns for Security

¶3. The Operations Center (OC), the central node that coordinates the efforts of the 34 field offices, was the next stop. The regional officers, supported by UN technical advisors, work in the map-filled OC, each with responsibility for two provinces. They act as liaisons between the provincial election officials (PEOs) and headquarters, sending instructions, receiving information and disseminating and alerting both sides to operational problems and concerns and working on resolutions. As a group, the regional officers agreed that security poses the great challenge for election day. At the Public Outreach center, Najafi highlighted the importance of getting the message out to the electorate, noting that the Afghan people want change and need to understand that the election is the way to for that to occur.

¶4. In their meeting, the Ambassador complimented IEC Chairman Dr. Lodin on the IEC's professionalism, high-standards and motivation, but pointed out that the challenge is in implementation of the sophisticated voting process. He noted that while soldiers may win the war, it is the IEC that must lead in winning the peace and commended the IEC on leading the first Afghan-run election. Lodin asserted

that the Afghan people, having experienced democracy, will want more, but reiterated that lack of security remains the biggest threat to the elections.

Sending a Message of Hope

15. The Ambassador and Dr. Lodin ended the event with a joint press conference. The Ambassador emphasized the critical role of the IEC in providing a secure, inclusive and credible election to the Afghan people. He acknowledged that security is an issue and stated that Afghan and NATO coalition forces will try to ensure security on election day. He applauded Afghans for taking the lead in the election, noting that in 2005, the election was run by the international community that now only plays a supporting role. Dr. Lodin acknowledged the critical role of the IEC, noting that it bears responsibility to ensure a credible and inclusive election for the Afghan people.

16. In response to a question about voting in districts not under Afghan National Security Force control, Lodin referenced the Electoral Law, noting that in certain circumstances, the IEC has the authority to delay elections if the security situation required. NOTE: This comment was picked up by the Afghan media and misreported as a statement that elections would be delayed in certain districts. At a subsequent meeting, Lodin clarified that he has no intention of recommending a delay to any part of the election but was only noting the authority of the electoral law to describe the range of options. END NOTE. The Ambassador closed by

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encouraging the media to support a vigorous policy debate among candidates so that the people of Afghanistan could decide on a way forward.

EIKENBERRY